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AUTHOR	Brown, Carlton E.
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ABSTRACT

Purposes for multicultural education in recent educational literature are reviewed and a transformist conception of multicultural education is expounded. A review of educational literature published since 1968 indicates that several objectives have been touted as core purposes for multicultural education. These include developing student understanding and appreciation of various racial and ethnic groups, correcting misconceptions of the cultures and histories of ethnic groups, removing racial and ethnic prejudices, and incorporating existing ethnic cultures into the mainstream of American socioeconomic and political life. Because the author believes that none of these is the true purpose of multicultural education, he proposes a transformist conception of multicultural education--defined as underlying attitudes which encourage schools to change so that the educational process will be more meaningful and useful to the poor and disenfranchised and will provide students with a sense of social and political power. Major assumptions of this transformist conception are that American society perpetuates economic, political, and social inequalities by race and social class and that public education promotes this inequality. Suggestions for changing public education along lines dictated by a transformist conception include reorganizing the curriculum and structure so that members of poor and nonwhite communities are provided with access to social influence and power redistribution. (DB)

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Carlton E. Brown
Program Development Specialist
University of New Hampshire/Portsmouth
Teacher Corps Project

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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New England Teacher Corps Network
PO Box 1065
Portsmouth, NH 03801

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Carlton E. Brown
Program Development Specialist
University of New Hampshire/Portsmouth
Teacher Corps Project

Over the past ten years, the educational literature has been spattered with works purporting to discuss and advance the cause of multicultural education. These works have been spawned from as many perspectives as there are writers. Synergists, (Bernier and Davis, 1972), community, school advocates, family background researchers, individualization proponents, CBTE advocates, and many others have attempted to draw relationships between their educational approaches and multicultural education. These writers, along with the major advocates of ethnic studies and multicultural education, have advocated a number of curriculum innovations to accomplish what they view as the major purposes of multicultural education.

A common core of purposes for multicultural education has developed out of this literature. One major purpose is to develop in students an understanding of respect for and acceptance of the cultures and histories of the various racial and ethnic groups that comprise the nation (Banks, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976; Grant, 1974, 1976; AACTE, 1974; Bernier and Davis, 1972). Another major purpose that appears in the literature is to correct myths and misconceptions of the cultures and histories of the many ethnic and racial groups that comprise the nation (Banks, 1975; Grant, 1973).

A third purpose for multicultural education is to help remove or reduce the racial and ethnic prejudices and stereotypes that continue to plague the nation (Gay, 1976; Banks, 1973, 1975). A fourth major purpose for multicultural education that has been developed in the literature is the incorporation of existing ethnic cultures into the mainstream of American socio-economic and political life (AACTE, 1974).

While we do not disagree with any of these purposes as good and important educational notions, we do take issue with these ideas being cast an the major purposes of multicultural education. It must be remembered that the concept of multicultural education developed out of the social and political freedom movements of Black Americans and other poor and non-white groups in the 1950's and 1960's. By the late 1960's, the leadership of these movements had already concluded that the problems the poor and non-white people faced were not primarily the prejudices of middle-class and wealthy and powerful whites so much as they were the very nature of our national social structure and institutions.

In addition, many social scientists since 1970 have concurred with the conclusions from the 1960's freedom movements that the problem to be rectified was not the personal deficits assumed to plague non-white people and poor people generally, nor was it solely the prejudicial beliefs and attitudes of whites. Rather, they have concluded that the problem is that our national social and economic structures with the complicity of all our social institutions including schools serve to perpetuate "intergational" poverty and social exclusion (Perlo, 1975; Bernier and Grant, 1976; Hamilton, 1973). Poor people generally, and non-white poor in particular, are largely blocked from influence on and participation in our social institutions as well as our economic institutions. Consequently, from one generation to the next, no background of abilities or experiences in the economic, political or social arenas is available for children. Their view of their own personal possibilities are thus dimmed and their actual array of economic and educational possibilities suffers a significant handicap. To add to this grim picture, these children of the poor see a lack of power of any kind, a lack of reasonable hope for improvement, and a lack of control over their lives evidenced in their own parents and neighbors. These realities are the essential ingredients of the "intergenerational transmission" of poverty.

In the meantime, the children of the middle-class and the wealthy see parents and neighbors who are largely self-sufficient economically, who own property of one kind or another, who can often exercise political, economic and social power of one kind or another, and who have at least a modicum of control over their lives. Part of the socialization of most of these children, unconsciously or consciously, includes the transmission of knowledge, abilities and attitudes that assist them throughout life in affecting their environment and making choices about their lives.

A person's life situation is essentially that person's cultural environment. It has been demonstrated by a number of social scientists that the dominant style for learning of an individual varies significantly by cultural background and socio-economic status (Weinstein, 1969; Castaneda and Ramirez, 1976; Cuba, 1972; and Dickerman, 1973). American public schools are organized to support and perpetuate a set of socio-cultural values and behaviors largely derived from the American middle class (Dickerman, 1973) and the prerogatives of an industrialized capitalist bureaucracy (Bowles and Gentis, 1976).

If the life situations of the poor prevent their children from achieving economic success and breaking the predictive power of socio-economic status, intervention must occur from outside the ranks of the poor -- barring massive social structural and economic change. The logical point of intervention is with the children. The logical place for intervention is the schools. We advocate a "transformist" conception of multicultural education to enable the schools to accomplish this intervention. A transformist conception of multicultural education is aimed directly toward creating a more meaningful and useful education for the poor and disenfranchised. Its major assumptions are that:

1. American society and social structure are racist and Anglo-conformist in that the social structure perpetuates economic, political, and social inequalities by race and social class or origin.

2. The structures, values and behavioral regularities of public educational institutions assist the social structure's perpetuation of racial and cultural inequality through the maintainance of a monocultural ideal of learning which accepts a small range of learning styles, learning content, and learning experiences; which holds little relevance or relationship to the lives and concerns of most students from lower class backgrounds; that accepts and furthers a belief in the superiority of Anglo-American industrial culture; and that generally places certificated personnel in the position of transmitters of learning and the student as a passive recipient.

3. The structures and values of American educational institutions prevent the effective exercise of democratic power by Third World and other generally poor groups through centralization of governance by an appointed or elected elite.

4. The structures, policies and norms of American educational institutions create situations in which Third World, working class and poor students experience higher drop-out and suspension rates, lower academic achievement, and less access to the materials and conditions necessary for success in the system.

5. No significant improvements in learning for Third World and other poor students will be effected without significant changes in the structures, value orientations, and behaviors of American public schools.

The major purposes of this transformist conception of multicultural education subsume those of other conceptions within two purposes. (1) Reorganizing the structure of public school systems to provide avenues of access, influence, and power redistribution to members of poor and non-white communities, and (2) reorganizing the curricular program to achieve a set of practical objectives for the children of the poor and dispossessed.

Public schools participate with other social institutions in barring the access of poor and non-white people to avenues of power and influence. This is not to say that school people purposely commit deeds to block access for poor and non-white people. The very structure of public school systems — particularly urban systems — can accomplish this even if populated by professionals devoid of active class and racial prejudices (Bowles and Gentis, 1976; Hamilton, 1970).

It must be remembered that poor and lower class adults -- both white and non-white -- have probably had negative or unsuccessful schooling experiences. These experiences are embedded in memory and make initiating interaction with schools a difficult proposition. In larger school systems, the bureaucratic structure is often so confusing that only those with experience with other instituions have a hope of discovering the appropriate place in the organization to find answers to their questions or resolutions to their problems. Finally, many such parents have already experienced bureaucratic disdain and run-around in their interactions with welfare and civil agencies, the police, the courts, and housing offices. This will undoubtedly increase their negative feelings and fears about schooling professionals due to their positional and socio-economic similarity to professionals in other institutions.

Finally, to ice the cake, most public school personnel only seek interaction with parents when a child is in disciplinary or academic difficulty. This obviously does nothing but reinforce the negativity and failure that infuses the poor parents' memories of schooling.

A second aspect of school organization that impedes the poor and non-white is that school personnel are all well certificated and middle-class and usually predominantly white. Most public schools do not allow or involve the preparation and use of non-professionals or para-professionals that may provide children with additonal positive images. In addition, in those scarce instances where schools utilize various aspects of their community as part of the education of children, they tend to provide few -- if any -- positive views of the communities of the poor or their inhabitants.

Finally, though this is not a conclusive discussion, traditionally organized public schools tend to be very anonymous operations that provide children with few places and ways of establishing ownership and comfort.

It is clear from these descriptions that if public schools are to serve the children of the poor and non-white, the organization of schools must undergo some substantive changes: (1) schools and school systems must develop institutionalized methodes of creating access to power and influence for the

through avenues such as community control, representative advisory groups, etc.; (2) schools and school systems must develop institutionalized legally-required interactive relationships between teachers and parents individually and in groups, such as teacher-advisory systems, parent visitations, and other approaches; (3) schools must legally institutionalize the use of parents as aides and para-professionals involved in the instructional process in schools. These persons should largely be saught from the school's poor and non-white communities. In addition, teachers and administrators should be sought who are representative (in race and ethnicity as well as cultural and attitudinal disposition) of the communities served by the school. (4) Finally, schooling should be reorganized to maximize responsiveness and comfort for the children of the poor and non-white groups. Formats to accomplish this are school-within-a-school structures, teacher/counselor positions, and neighborhood decoration of the school's physical environment. These four recommendations constitute only a portion of the reorganization that a transformist conception of multicultural education requires.

Our second major purpose for a transformist conception of multicultural education is reorganizing the curriculum to achieve a set of practical objectives for children of poor and non-white families. Traditional public school curricula are centered around bodies of information and instructional processes that have been determined by school professionals, scholars, and the middle-class lay public as those things that people must know and the ways in which it is best to learn them. A great deal of the literature on multicultural education, and, before that, the literature on the disadvantaged, has documented the ways in which these materials and instructional processes are largely irrelevant and not useful to poor and non-white children (Fantini and Weinstein, 1966, 1968, 1969; Cuban, 1972; Dickerman, 1974). While we will not argue that many of the skills taught and information disseminated in schools are important, we will assert that poor and non-white children have some significantly different educational needs than those traditionally met by public schools.

In addition to basic language competencies, mathematical, and social science skills and in addition to learning experiences about their own and other racial and ethnic groups' histories and cultures; poor and non-white students need an education that addresses directly and honestly the realities under which they live. A transformist multicultural curriculum (1) would include social literacy instructional approaches which are basically social science and inquiry learning involving the leading of students to examine their own lives and the community in which they live in order that they may better understand the nation's social and economic structures and how they operate, as well as their own place within those structures. (2) A transformist multicultural curriculum also includes involving students in taking action in social and political arenas on issues that directly affect the quality of their lives; i.e., racist hiring practices of a local business, differential city services to poor communities, making action recommendations to local businesses concerning their relationships to the community, etc. (3) Learning experiences in this transformist conception of multicultural education should all be derived from the "generative" (Friere, 1970) or recurring themes extant in their local society and community. Again, this is not an exhaustive rendering of the curriculum requirements of the transformist conception of multicultural education, but rather one designed to name and begin to elucidate the major concepts and ideas.

The overarching intent of the transformist approach to multicultural education is to provide students with a sense of social and political power and will and to develop habits and attitudes of exploration and the utilization of knowledge, power and influence. We believe that this conception describes the role of public schools in assisting poor and non-white students to break the crippling grip of the predictive powers of the status of poverty and race.